



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA LEADS RESEARCH MISSION OF U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS' UNDERWATER HABITATS

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Park Service (NPS) will be conducting a scientific research mission on board the NOAA ship *Nancy Foster* from March 21 to April 2, 2006. The joint mission will explore and characterize near shore habitats (from five to 1000 meters) within waters in the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico using a suite of remote sensing tools. The mission results will help guide natural resource management in federal territorial waters of Puerto Rican, and US Virgin Island.

Priority areas for 2006 include NPS's Buck Island Reef National Monument and important marine resource areas along the southwestern portion of Puerto Rico.

This will mark the third year of an ongoing research project by the biogeography team from the National Ocean Service's Center for Monitoring and Assessment. Data from the mission will be combined with biological fish census data collected from 2000-2006 to produce maps of the sea floor topography and habitats. The mission will also help NOAA meet its commitment to the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force to map moderate depth coral reef ecosystems, and provide new information to update nautical charts covering the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"One of the most important goals of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force is to complete the mapping of coral reef resources in United States waters," said NOAA's Timothy Keeney, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) co-chair. "These annual surveys off the Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands not only assist in meeting that objective, but are also providing us with considerable information about the marine life that coral reef ecosystems support."

Results from last year's survey have already resulted in several resource management changes, including the recently announced decision of the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council to ban fishing at the Grammanik Bank, a shallow area south of St. Thomas which is the spawning grounds of several species of threatened fish including the Nassau grouper which is currently being considered for inclusion on the endangered species list.

NOAA scientists will explore the type and extent of habitats in selected portions of the project areas using multi-beam sonar and under water video cameras. During the mission scientists will collect high-resolution bathymetry; habitat hardness, and habitat roughness; and complementary video data that will provide information about the seafloor. A Kongsberg EM1002 multibeam echosounder will be used to collect bathymetric depth information and backscatter imagery in depths of five meters to 1000 meters. A deep-water remotely operated vehicle (ROV) operated by a contractor, will capture underwater video imagery of seafloor habitats in depths down to 1,000 meters.

The National Center for Coastal Ocean Science is collaborating with other NOAA program offices including NOAA's Marine and Aircraft Operations, the National Geodetic Survey, the Office of Coast Survey, and the Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services.

The U.S. Virgin Islands 's Division of Fish & Wildlife and Coastal Zone Management Program, the US National Park Service, the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, the University of Hawaii's Hawaii Mapping Research Group, and private sector partners are also a part of the effort. The study is supported by NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program.

The NOAA research ship *Nancy Foster*, based in Charleston, S.C., is one of a fleet of research and survey vessels used by NOAA to improve understanding of the marine environment. The former Navy vessel was converted in 2002 to conduct a wide variety of coastal oceanographic research projects along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The ship has 17 permanent crewmembers and accommodations for up to 16 scientists. The *Nancy Foster* began operations in April 2003 and was commissioned on May 10, 2004.

NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department. NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA National Ocean Service: <http://www.oceanservice.noaa.gov>

NCCOS: <http://coastalscience.noaa.gov>

CCMA: <http://coastalscience.noaa.gov/monitoring-assessment>
http://ccma.nos.noaa.gov/products/biogeography/usvi_nps_2006

Coral Reef Conservation Program: <http://www.coralreef.noaa.gov/>

NOAA Office Marine and Aviation Operations: <http://www.oma.noaa.gov/>